## What is Important?

Objective: The students will investigate the interruption of the life

cycle of the goldfinch. They will weigh evidence on different points of view and make decisions based on that

evidence.

**Materials:** 

Pamphlets on weed regulation in Midwest states (a sample is included), books on songbirds and the goldfinch's habitat, and if possible – bird and/or farming experts,

extension agents

**Background:** The numbers of goldfinch have declined greatly in the recent years. The main causes appear to be loss of habitat and food sources. One of the problems related to the goldfinch decline is that its preferred food is thistles. Goldfinch also use thistle material in their nests. Thistles, on the other hand, have been declared noxious weeds. This is because non-native thistle species such as bull thistle and Canada thistle have been introduced to our prairie ecosystems. These plants, called invasive exotics, can out-compete native grasses and plants and create monocultures. A monoculture is a place where one species lives; in this case only Canada thistle or bull thistle live there. These thistles grow in patches so thick other plants can't grow where thistles grow. Wildlife or domestic animals can't eat Canada or bull thistle, so these monocultures reduce the food source for native and domestic animals.

> Most ranchers and managers of wild areas believe these thistles need to be eradicated wherever found. However, there are native thistles that goldfinches can eat, but because thistles have gotten a bad reputation, many people will kill any thistle, thinking they are all invasive exotics. Goldfinches can live on other species, like dandelions, but they need places were native thistles and dandelions can grow.

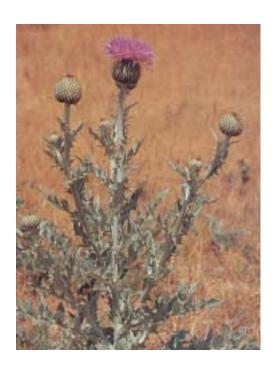
> Another problem is that with more efficient farming practices, less land is left out of cultivation and weeds, like dandelions and thistles, are not permitted to grow. Homeowners also that want perfect weed-free lawns. This creates a conflict between the needs of the goldfinch and the wants of humans. The conflict may be similar, though on a smaller scale, to the spotted owl controversy, which has raged in the Pacific Northwest. The questions in both habitats remain the same: whose needs should take precedence - humans or wildlife - or can a balance be found?

Procedure:

Divide the class into small groups and give each a particular identity (listed below) the back ground information about the decline of the goldfinch population, and the sample weed brochure. Identities could include ranchers, farmers, park managers, homeowners, animal rights people, nature organizations, like Sierra Club, a garden club members, people who feed and watch the birds.

Assign each group the task of deciding what to do about the declining numbers of the goldfinch. Have each group research the topic from the point of view that they have been assigned. Have the groups identify the issues and the sides, research the issues, and plan how they will present their opinions to the class in town meeting forum.

Organize a town meeting. The town meeting will be presided over by either the principal, a local politician, or a student elected by the class. This person will organize and summarize the information given by the groups and, at the end of the meeting, help the group remember important points that were presented. As a class, the "town" will decide on the best course of action that they, as a town and as individuals, can take to protect the goldfinches and the residents of the town/area.



Left:
(Native)
Wavyleaf
Thistle
Right:
(Non-native)
Canada
Thistle





